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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

MAY 24 1988

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Thorpe's Opera House  
other names/site number David City Opera House  
NeHBS #BU05-56 OHBIN #11-09-01

### 2. Location

street & number 457-1/2 "D" St.  not for publication  
city, town David City  vicinity  
state Nebraska code NE county Butler code 023 zip code 68632

### 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	<u>      </u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>      </u>	<u>      </u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>      </u>	<u>      </u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>      </u>	<u>      </u> objects
		<u>1</u>	<u>      </u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing: Opera House Buildings in Nebraska 1867-1917  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

### 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.  
James A. Hanson May 16, 1988  
Signature of certifying official Date  
Director, Nebraska State Historical Society  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.  
Signature of commenting or other official Date  
State or Federal agency and bureau

### 5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:  
 entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.  
 determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet.  
 determined not eligible for the National Register.  
 removed from the National Register.  
 other, (explain:)  
Beth Boland 9/28/88  
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Recreation & Culture: theatre, music  
facility

Social: meeting hall

Commerce/Trade: specialty store

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Social: civic

Recreation &amp; Culture: theatre

Work in progress

Commerce/Trade: business

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Other: two-part commercial block

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation brick

walls brick

roof tin

other sandstone window decor

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

Thorpe's Opera House is located in the downtown business district of David City, the county seat of Butler County. Constructed in 1889 by William Thorpe, the pressed brick three-story, Two-Part Commercial Block structure measures 50'x108' and shows a slightly peaked roof with shingles and a flat tar-coated roof. Sandstone scallops and arched designs decorate the facade windows. The structure originally included an elaborate cornice with finial peak, but the peak was destroyed by a tornado. Access to the second-floor theatre is through double doors topped by a sandstone portico between two retail establishments. A ticket window remains on the second floor landing, to the left of the double door entrance to the auditorium.

The auditorium is 40' wide and 56' long from the back to the edge of the apron. The balcony, originally a horseshoe around the auditorium, retains 27' across the rear of the house only. The raked balcony has ten separate levels, each five inches high. Access to the stairs is in the northeast corner of the foyer outside the auditorium. Two-tiered boxes originally existed on both sides of the stage; only those on stage left remain. A reported seating capacity of 950 consisted of nonpermanent seating. The original interior was painted blue with a nongilt gold trim; restoration has mimicked the original colors. Dressing rooms, once located under the stage, were removed when the building was converted to apartments.

The plain wooden proscenium saucer-edged arch extends 22' wide and 18' high. Dimensions of the stage proper are 22'5" from the curtain line to the back wall, a 4'1" rounded apron, and 9' wings on each side of the stage. One trap door exists center stage; four grooves for scenery remain.

Except for modifications made to the street level facade, the structural and historical integrity of the building and theatre has been preserved.

 See continuation sheet

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Performing Arts

Entertainment/Recreation

Social History

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Period of Significance

1889-1917

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates

1889

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Thorpe's Opera House is significant for its association with and in reference to the historic context "Aesthetic Systems: Itinerant and Local Performing Arts in Nebraska" and the property type of "Opera House Buildings in Nebraska, 1867 to 1917." Under Criterion A, this opera house is significant in the areas of the performing arts; entertainment/recreation; and social history, on a state level, as a well preserved example of an opera house building in Nebraska. The building retains a high degree of historical integrity, possessing the physical and associative characteristics to make it an eligible member of its property type.

This opera house is significant in the area of performing arts for bringing a variety of entertainment to the community of David City. As a facility for the performing arts, Thorpe's (later David City) Opera House offered productions such as grand and comic opera; popular New York touring productions; gospel singers; classics like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Quo Vadis*, and *The Shepherd of the Hills*; dialect plays; musical concerts; melodramas; minstrel shows; Shakespeare; Sanford Dodge; the traveling stock companies; musical comedies; hypnotists and magicians; and the actress Elsie de Tourney. (See following table of Representative Entertainments, 1895-1915.)

This opera house is significant in the area of entertainment/recreation, since it provided a place where the whole community could gather to attend dances, lectures, humorists and moving pictures. (See following table of Representative Entertainments, 1895-1915.)

This opera house is significant in the area of social history, because it gave David City a neutral, nonaffiliated location for WCTU meetings and functions; fraternal lodge meetings; high school commencements; and political meetings. (See following table of Representative Entertainments.) In the days before radio, television, and sound movies, activities at the opera house were anticipated for days or weeks ahead of time. It provided a place for people to get together to have a good time and forget their troubles over crops, weather, taxes, the railroads, and the generally hard life of settling the Great Plains.

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Butler County Press. 4 Sep. 1891 - 25 Oct. 1917.  
David City Opera House, exterior. Postcard. Andrea Paul Collection, Lincoln, NE.  
David City Tribune. 9 Sep. 1885 - 30 Dec. 1887.  
Glass, Rita M. "The History of the Thorpe Opera House." M. Thesis. U of Nebraska at Omaha, 1981.  
Klosterman, Beth. Letter to the author. David City: 1 Sep. 1987.  
---. Personal interview. David City: 9 Nov. 1986.  
---. Telephone interviews. David City: 7 Nov. 1986, and 3 Sep. 1987.  
McCracken, Everett, ed. David City Centennial History Book 1873-1973. David City, NE: The Banner-Press Publishing Co., Inc., 1973.  
"Opened New Opera House." Butler County Press 28 Nov. 1912.  
Reisdorff, Jim. Letter to the author. David City: 29 Sep. 1986.  
Thorpe's Opera House. David City site visit. 9 Nov. 1986.  
Thorpe's Opera House, exterior. Postcard. Andrea Paul Collection, Lincoln, NE.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

D. Layne Ehlers (see below)

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property Less than one [ ] acre

UTM References

A 

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Zone      Easting      Northing

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

This property is described as Lots 5 and 6, Block 32, Original Town of David City, Butler County, Nebraska

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire town lots that have been historically associated with this property.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title D. Layne Ehlers, Principal Investigator

organization OHBIN Study date April, 1988

street & number 2302 South 11th telephone [402] 435-6946

city or town Lincoln state NE zip code 68502

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Function or Use : Historic Functions

Commerce/Trade: restaurant

Funerary: mortuary

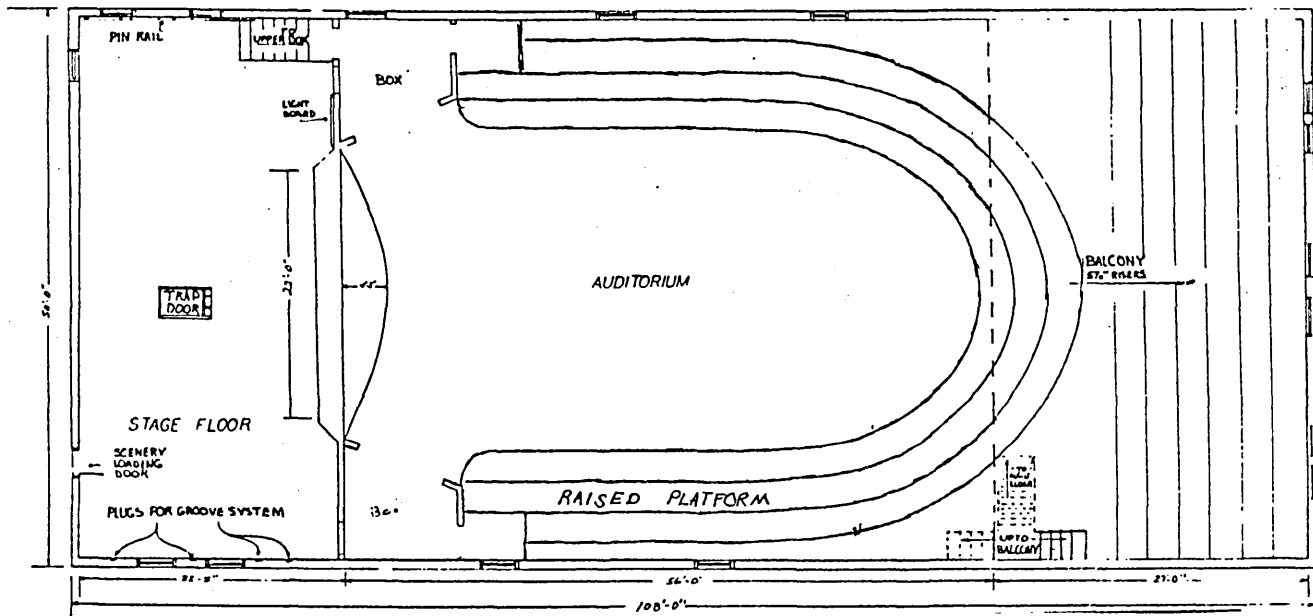
MAY 2 4 1983

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Floor plan, Thorpe's Opera House, David City



Source: Glass (1981):51

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The three-story brick rectangular building has a flat roof with stepped parapet wall. The front (north) facade is adorned with narrow wall and corner pilasters that divide the building into three bays, each bay containing paired window units (on the second and third levels) capped with decorative stone lintels and arches. The third story windows are now boarded up. The street level facade displays cast iron columns and a pressed metal wall cornice. The "double store" is divided by a central entry (leading to the opera house) showing cast iron columns, double doors, transom, and cornice. The storefronts have been remodeled-- the northwest storefront shows new brick infill, plate glass windows and new door, and the northeast storefront shows plate glass windows and new entry, although the transom window and recessed entry configuration remain intact.

The building originally housed a furniture and undertaking business, and a restaurant on the street level. Although used for apartments in the 1920s, the only major change in the interior space was the removal of the dressing rooms. The building no longer contains apartment units and historical integrity has been preserved (see photos 2, 3, 4). The first level retail space is currently used as a civic center and as office space for a gas company. Restoration work on the second level opera house is on-going and the space is used today as a community theater.

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The period of significance derives from the original construction date of the building, 1889. This opera house represented a major step forward in civility for temperance-minded David Citians, since William Brownfield Thorpe, the owner, constructed it in a location removed from the saloon, so that members of the WCTU could attend community functions without entering the same building shared by a drinking establishment, as had been the case in an earlier opera house, Nowotny's Hall. The period of significance continues through 1917, the year considered to signal the end of the opera house era in Nebraska, based on declining numbers of touring companies nationally and rising numbers of movie houses and automobiles. The local opening of the Jewel Movie Theatre in 1908 and the erection of the David City Auditorium in 1911 took most of the business away from the David City Opera House, leaving only sporadic events dwindling in quantity year by year.



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Thorpe's Opera House, David City  
Representative Entertainments, 1895-1915

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DATE	EVENT AND PERFORMERS
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**Social History**

Feb 1896	Lecture by WCTU National Secretary
May 1896	David City High School Commencement
Oct 1896	Politican debate, spokesmen for Bryan and McKinley
Jun 1898	David City High School commencement
Nov 1914	opening class, Scribner's School of Dancing

**Entertainment/Recreation**

Feb 1896	Social Hour Club's St. Valentine's Day Masquerade Ball
Feb 1896	Fire Department Masquerade Ball
Nov 1896	Ladies Aid Society Charity Ball
Dec 1896	Fire Dept. 19th annual ball
Nov 1899	David City Concert Band grand ball and concert
Oct 1900	Col. Copeland on "Seeing the Elephant"
Nov 1900	Dr. Clark, lecturer
Oct 1902	Hon. W. J. Bryan
Oct 1902	Adrian M. Newens on "The Sky Pilot"
Nov 1905	John P. O. John on "The Value of Man"
Oct 1907	Public dance, music by York Orchestra
Oct 1910	Public dance, music by Gilmore's Concert & Dance Orchestra
Oct 1911	Miss Ethel Dunn, on the Oberammergau Passion Play
Nov 1914	Nels Daily, the "community interest" man
Nov 1914	Snow Ball Party

**Performing Arts**

Oct 1895	Tableau d'Art Co. elocution drills and posings
Jan 1896	Osborne Comedy Co. in <i>Jane</i> Professor Deal, hypnotist
Feb 1896	<i>The Dutch Recruit</i> by Army Reserve Company E
Apr 1896	Eclipse Comedy Co.
May 1896	Tennessean Jubilee Singers
Jun 1896	Boston Comic Opera Co. in <i>Mascot</i> Pringle-May Comedy Co.
Oct 1897	Mr. Parks directing the Imperial Quartet

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Thorpe's Opera House, David City  
Representative Entertainments, 1895-1915

DATE EVENT AND PERFORMERS

Performing Arts, cont'd.

Nov 1897	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>
Jul 1898	<i>A Brave Enemy</i> , home talent directed by Ben S. Mears, professional actor
Sep 1898	Redmond Dramatic Co.
Oct 1898	<i>Esther</i> , home talent cantata directed by Prof. Watson <i>Olivette</i> , Merrie Bell Opera Co. <i>Gilhooley's Reception</i>
Nov 1899	<i>Under the Dome</i> by Lincoln J. Carter <i>Gilhooley's Reception</i>
Jan 1900	Lotus Lady Quartette and Mandolin Club of Chicago
Sep 1900	<i>Railroad Jack</i>
Sep 1901	<i>Which Is Who</i> , Frank H. Livingstone Myrtle Vinton Show Co.
Oct 1901	Johnston-Slater Big Colored Minstrel Show George Edeson's <i>Two Married Men</i> with S. S. Simpson and W. A. Parker <i>Quo Vadis</i> Schubert Symphony Club and Ladies' Quartette of Chicago
Nov 1901	David City Choral Club vocal concert Elsie de Tourney in <i>Mary, Queen of Scots</i> and <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> Uncle Josh Spruceby Co. Hahn Quartette
Dec 1901	<i>The Eleventh Hour</i> by Lincoln J. Carter
Sep 1902	<i>A Hoosier Daisy</i> , Bessie Clinton
Oct 1902	<i>A Devil's Lane</i> , James F. Green and the Elmore Sisters
Nov 1902	<i>Down Mobile</i> by Lincoln J. Carter
Sep 1903	<i>Her Only Sin</i> with Julia Gray, John T. Nicholson, and J. Hooker Wright, by Lincoln J. Carter
Nov 1903	<i>The Two Orphans</i> , Gilbert Faust, mgr. <i>Hans Hanscom</i> <i>Birds of a Feather</i> , Ed Andrews Opera Co.
Oct 1904	Lewis & Poore's <i>10 Nights in a Bar Room</i> <i>Four Great Stars</i> : Sybil Sammis, Bohumir Kryl, Mabelle Carolyn Church, and Sol Heinbroner
Nov 1904	Bennett & Buhler's <i>The Two Orphans</i> <i>Nettie, the News Girl</i> with Wanda Ludlow and Lem B. Parker

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Thorpe's Opera House, David City  
Representative Entertainments, 1895-1915

DATE EVENT AND PERFORMERS

Performing Arts, cont'd.

Dec 1904 *Railroad Jack*  
Feb 1905 Lulu Tyler Gates Musical Co.  
Oct 1905 Cosgrove Concert Co., Harry Woods, mgr.  
Nov 1905 *A Royal Slave*, Gordon & Bennett's Co.  
Oct 1906 *Romeo and Juliet*, Sanford Dodge and Miss Marshall  
*The Missouri Girl*  
Harry Kimmel Co. in *The Happy Pair*  
Nov 1906 *Miss America*  
Dec 1906 Porter J. White's *Faust* with Olga Verne  
Moss Comic Opera Co.  
Aug 1907 *The Trust Busters*  
Oct 1907 *The Mountaineer, Belle of Manish, and Sandy Bottom*, mgr., Charles  
H. Colson, Guarantee Amusement Co.  
Nov 1907 *Pickings from Puck*, directed by the Dubinsky Brothers with M.M.  
Dubinsky, Pauline Westerly, Carroll Drew, and Irene Daniel  
*A Thoroughbred Tramp*, Rush Thompson  
Dec 1907 Boston Ideal Co. in *La Mascotte*  
Oct 1908 Slayton Jubilee Singers with Charles Downs  
Spedden-Page Stock Co. in *Winchester*  
Nov 1908 *Three Years in Arkansaw*, Perce R. Benton  
*The Farmer's Daughter*  
George Bartlett Cutter and Jesse Mack Co.  
Dec 1908 W. F. Mann, presenting *Tempest and Sunshine* with Alice B. Haly and  
Crystal Vizzard  
Oct 1909 Attebery & Guy's *Jesse James*  
Williams-Hughes Dramatic Co. with Edith Spencer  
*David Warwick* with James Barber  
*Lena Rivers*, directed by Burton Nixon  
Nov 1909 Henry Cox. & Co. (Mrs. Cox is a David City Girl, Queenie Snow)  
*Hans Hanson* with Lew Wren, James T. McAlpine, mgr.  
*Under the Harvest Moon*  
Dr. Conley on "A Man Wanted"  
Dixie Jubilee Singers  
Dec 1909 Castle Square Quartette

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Thorpe's Opera House, David City  
Representative Entertainments, 1895-1915

DATE            EVENT AND PERFORMERS

**Performing Arts, cont'd.**

Oct 1910	Rounds and his All-Star Specialty Co. Hyperion Trio of Kansas City
Nov 1910	<i>St. Elmo</i> The Great La=Wayne, Australian hypnotist, presented by Frank M. Shores <i>In Golden Valley</i> <i>Weary Willie Walker</i> with Vic Crane and Edna Lurene <i>St. Elmo</i> Trousdale Brothers' <i>The Man in the Box</i>
Dec 1910	<i>Hans Hanson</i>
Oct 1911	<i>The Punkin Husker</i> by Sutherland Stock Co. Alex Story's production of <i>As Told in the Hills</i> with Mabel Owen <i>The College Boy</i> , under the direction of DeGuerre and Ross <i>Daniel Boone in Old Kentuck</i>
Nov 1911	<i>Our Village Postmaster</i> with Charles B. Mills <i>Sylvia</i> , high school chorus home talent Bohumir Kyr1 and His Band
Dec 1911	The Perrys offer <i>Our Village Postmaster</i> with Charles Mills
Oct 1912	Mysterious Smith Co. Reynolds & Ross Co. doing <i>The Girl from Laramie</i> with J. Cleveland Bronner and Mae Harding
Oct 1913	<i>The Rosary</i>
Nov 1913	<i>TheIma</i> , presented by Henry W. Link Edward W. Rowland Jr., presenting <i>The Rosary</i>
Dec 1913	Gaskil & MacVitty's <i>The Shepherd of the Hills</i>
Oct 1914	<i>Butler County Fair</i> , Home talent Joe Weber's New York Company in <i>Elmo, Where Do You Live?</i>
Nov 1914	Aldred Pierce's <i>The Price She Paid</i> with Sylvia Summers <i>Out of the Fold</i> , home talent <i>Ole, the Swede Detective</i>
Nov 1915	Gilbert & Sullivan's <i>Pinafore</i>

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Photographs

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The following information is the same for all David City photographs:

NAME OF PROPERTY: Thorpe's Opera House  
CITY, COUNTY, STATE: David City, Butler County, Nebraska  
NEHBS SITE No.: BU05-56  
OHBIN SITE No.: 11-09-01  
NAME OF PHOTOGRAPHER: Christian H. Ehlers

PHOTO NUMBER: David City #1  
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 11-09-86 (8611/1:17)  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society  
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Exterior view, looking south southeast at the north (front) facade.

PHOTO NUMBER: David City #2  
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 11-09-86 (8611/1:1)  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society  
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking south at the stage.

PHOTO NUMBER: David City #3  
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 11-09-86 (8611/1:6)  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society  
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking southwest at the box seating area to the right of the stage.

PHOTO NUMBER: David City #4  
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 11-09-86 (8611/1:10)  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society  
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking north at the original curtain (dated 1922). This curtain is on display on the north wall in the northwest corner of the auditorium area.